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AUTHOR Power, Jenny
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ABSTRACT

This study documented a kindergarten teacher's efforts to actively involve parents as partners in the literacy education of their children. In addition to the teacher, subjects of the study were her 26 pupils and their parents, all residents of rural New South Wales. Data were collected through anecdotal records, field observations, interviews, and video-audio tapes. The parent participation program included parent-teacher meetings, home visits, excursions, parent education materials and videos, parent classroom volunteers, and parent participation in a staff development day. The study revealed that the development of a partnership between the teacher and parents had multiple benefits for both parties. The parents provided the teacher with direct feedback regarding successful or unsuccessful classroom teaching strategies, thus assisting with program evaluation and planning. The parents also provided insights into their children's capabilities, which altered the teacher's expectations of the children. The study also found that by encouraging parents to report observations of their children's literacy learning, the parents became more discriminating observers and more interested in their children's learning. (MDM)

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Parent /Teacher Partnerships in Early Literacy Learning: The benefits for teachers.

Jenny Power

Faculty of Education, Work and Training

University of New England, Northern Rivers.

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SYNOPSIS

This report focuses on one Kindergarten teacher and her attempts to learn from and with parents, about their children. Together as partners they support the literacy learning of their children.

The study revealed that the development of a partnership between the teacher and parents had multiple benefits for both parties. The parents provided the teacher with direct feedback regarding successful or unsuccessful classroom teaching strategies, thus assisting with program evaluation and planning. The parents also provided insights into their children's capabilities which altered the teacher's expectations of the children.

The study found that by encouraging parents to report observations of their children's literacy learning, the parents became more discriminating observers. The parents also reported becoming more interested in their children's learning and sought information from the teacher in order to assist their children at home. Through regular contact with the teacher, parents were provided with specific suggestions to support the literacy learning of their child.

The greatest benefit of the project was the increased interest in reading and writing both at home and school displayed by all children in the class. They were encouraged to link school literacy activities with home learning. The children brought into the classroom home literacy artefacts which shaped the classroom routine. Thus in this classroom a partnership between parents and the teacher was fostered which increased the Kindergarten children's understanding, interest and enjoyment of reading and writing.

INTRODUCTION

The benefits of parental participation in children's education have been extensively documented, particularly in regard to the significant contribution parents play in children's early language and literacy development (Durkin,1966; Heath, 1983; Teale and Sulzby, 1986; Wells, 1986). One of the most prominent studies relating to the advantages of parental involvement in the children's reading performance is the Haringey Reading Project, carried out in the 1970's by Tizard, Schofield and Hewison (1982). The project endeavoured, firstly, to increase the amount of parental help given to six - eight year old children learning to read, and, secondly, to evaluate the impact of that help on the children's reading performance. The study concluded that "children who receive parental help are significantly better in reading attainment than comparable children who do not", even compared to similar children involved in "small-group instruction in reading given by a highly competent specialist teacher" (Tizard et al , 1982, p.14). A follow-up study (Hewison, 1988) three years later showed that this advantage had been maintained. More recently, studies have suggested that factors associated with a child's parents, family or home environment, have a greater impact on literacy achievement than do school related factors (Silvern, 1985; Rowe, 1990). Clearly the importance of parents as their children's first teachers warrants recognition by schools.

Many educators acknowledge the significance of home literacy experiences in the preparation of children for success or failure at school. Teachers have sought to harness the largely untapped 'teaching resource' parents could provide by conducting parent literacy education programmes (Hill, 1991; Dundas & Strong, 1987). However, a major concern expressed by teachers who have conducted workshops or education programs for parents is that they are preaching to the converted.

> "The parents I really wanted to reach didn't turn up. I really feel that I'd like to involve all the parents of the children in my class, to encourage them all to read at home with their families. There must be a way to reach them all!"
> Kindergarten teacher's comment evaluating an education program she conducted for parents.

Toomey (1989) contends that such parent education programmes may distance some families from schools, widening the gap between the literacy achievements of children from families where home reading is very different to school reading contexts. Several reports now suggest that parents, particularly those from disadvantaged socio-economic groups, are keenly interested in their children's literacy learning and willing to support their children both through home activities and school involvement, if a concerted approach is made by the school (Cairney, 1991: Edwards, 1989).

An increasing number of reports indicate that it is not only middle class parents who are willing to help their children with reading and writing at home. Tizard, Schofield and Hewison (1982) reported that 95% of parents from the disadvantaged schools where they conducted the Haringey Reading Project were involved in their study. The parents commented that they were pleased to be involved and found helping their children with reading at home most rewarding, even those parents who were not confident in their own literacy ability or who spoke a second language at home. Epstein's (1986, p. 280) study of parent reactions to teacher involvement practices stated that parents 'overwhelmingly agreed that teachers should involve parents in learning activities at home.'

These reports indicate that the majority of parents are willing to become partners with teachers to support their children's learning. The benefits of such partnerships for parents and their children are well documented so what dissuades teachers from establishing stronger links between their classrooms and the homes of the children they teach?

> *The sheer magnitude of teacher's duties and responsibilities tend to dissuade many teachers from initiating a parental involvement program. Given that the regular duties of teachers more than fill up a day, it is understandable that they may be reluctant to assume other duties.* (Rasinski, 1989, p.85).

Perhaps the benefits of such partnerships for teachers are not as readily recognized. This study outlines a Kindergarten teacher's efforts to work with parents as partners in the children's literacy education. The aim of this paper is to focus on the benefits of increased parental participation for the teacher.

DESIGN AND PROCEDURES.

Micro-ethnography was chosen as the most appropriate research method enabling a detailed observation of the interaction between the teacher, children and the parents. The focus of micro-ethnography is to "observe cycles of events that regularly occur across time" (Green and Wallatt,1981. p. xii). A broad descriptive question was posed to guide the study.

What occurs when a teacher actively seeks to involve all parents as partners in the literacy education of their children?

The method of micro-ethnography is not a linear research model. Rather, it is a cyclic model in which one step may lead to the next as Figure 1. illustrates. The study has continued through many cycles as the data is continuously collected and analysed to identify patterns or themes.

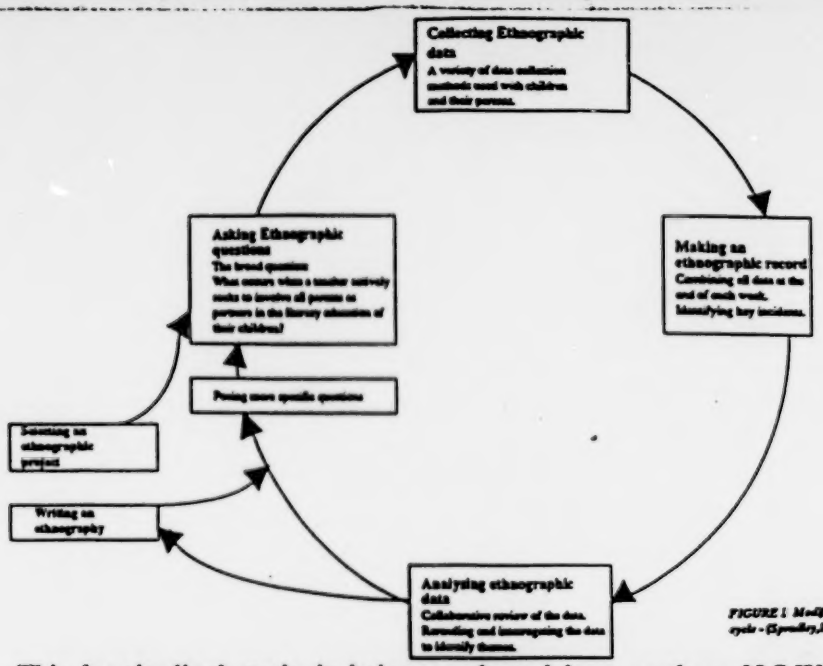
Collecting Ethnographic data
A variety of data collection methods used with children and their parents.
Making an ethnographic record
Asking Ethnographic questions
The broad question:
Posing more specific questions
Writing an ethnography
Analysing ethnographic data
Collaborative review of the data. Recording and interrogating the data to identify themes.

FIGURE 1 Modified Ethnographic Research cycle - (Spradley,1980,p.29)

This longitudinal study is being conducted in a northern N.S.W country school. T Kindergarten class is comprised of 26 children from a range of socio economic backgroun In this study a teacher and a lecturer work collaboratively as classroom researchers; both ha contributed to the collection and analysis of data. A variety of naturalistic data collecti techniques were selected to record as much information as possible. The following tab indicates the data collection methods used by the researchers throughout terms 1, 2 and 3 1992.

Data Collection Technique	Teacher	Lecturer
Anecdotal records	Individual records of children's classroom literacy behaviour noted daily.	
Field notes		Observations of interactions between teacher and children recorded twice weekly.
Journals	Regular description of and reflection on parental contact. Fortnightly communication with parents via home/school journal or cassette.	Reflective journal recording concerns, questions and feelings.
Pictorial records		Photographs of children engaged in literacy activities. Photographic records of excursions.
Running files	Individual collections of work samples for each child (children's writing, letters written or dictated by children, notes from parents)	
Interviews	Parents: Term 1: Home visits Term 2: School interviews Term 3: Home visits Term 4: Home visits Fortnightly reflective interviews between teacher and lecturer	Parents: Term 1: Home visits Term 2: School interviews Term 3: Home visits Term 4: Home visits Fortnightly reflective interviews between teacher and lecturer.
Video/audio taping		All interviews tape recorded and transcribed. Classroom language sessions video and audio taped once per week.

Table 1: Data Collection Table

Analysis of the data occurred gradually through discussion and rereading of the journals, fie notes and transcripts of the taped parents' interviews. The reseachers returned repeatedly

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their broad question to interrogate the data. More specific questions were posed to explore the themes emerging in study.

IMPLEMENTATION.

The teacher was convinced of the benefits of home/school partnerships for children's literacy learning. Her goal was to actively involve all parents in the literacy program using a broad range of strategies. It was her intention not just to involve parents, but to learn with and from them as partners in their children's education. The teacher decided to reach out to communicate with parents using a number of different strategies. The following Table 2, is a summary of the communication methods used.

Month	Parent Contact	Classroom Contact
February	Introductory Parent Meeting Afternoon Meeting 2.30 p.m. Evening Meeting 7.30 p.m. Video used to outline class program Encouraged parents to read at home All parents attended	
March	Home visits - 30 minutes Parents informed teacher about child's interests, likes, etc. Parental concerns aired and literacy learning expectations discussed. All parents participated	Classroom library established for home borrowing. Letters written at home incorporated into class program. Books and games from home incorporated in classroom program.
April	Parents attended excursion and healthy lunch (20 family members attended). Parents volunteer to help in classroom.	Unit concluded. Class excursion to hospital and healthy lunch. Group activities commenced utilising parent assistance.
May	Parent/teacher interviews at school. Parents reported observations of children's literacy learning. (4 parents unable to attend.) Children rehearsed books at home.	Teacher expectations altered, reflected in greater encouragement of quieter children. School-made books produced for home reading. Children read to whole class and to reading circles.
June	Video produced for parents: "Reading at Home". Parents invited to staff development day. Child care provided. (10 parents attended).	As above (continued).
August	"Book It!" reading incentive program commenced. Parents attended excursion, "seed walk" and "seed party" (15 parents attended). Home visits commenced. Parent/teacher journals introduced. Parents borrowed video and reading materials. New parents volunteered to help in the classroom.	Library borrowing extended for "Book It!" program. Letters and books from home continue. "Book It!" monthly target achieved by all.
September	All parents invited to visit the classroom for observation mornings. (2 parents unable to attend)	"Readers Theatre" production inspired by children's interest. Children begin writing small books.
Remainder of year: Home visits planned for November. Other activities as needs arise.		

Table 2: Time line of communication with parents.

THE PATTERNS OBSERVED.

Micro-ethnography is the study of cycles or patterns that emerge from recorded observations. In this study patterns of interconnection between home and school have become apparent.

Two way communication alters the teacher's expectations.
Most parent involvement programs have been largely restricted to one-way communication from the school to the parents. The teacher invites parents "up to the school" to learn from teachers about how to help their children at home. Rarely are parents asked to inform the school or teacher about their child's interests, likes or concerns. Rarely do teachers affirm parents in their role, congratulating them on the work they do with their children at home.

This study began by recognizing parents as experts. The parents were invited during the first home visit to inform the teacher about their child Home visits formed a significant component of this study following evidence suggesting that the most valued form of communication by parents is personal contact with teachers either through face-to-face contact or through the telephone (Catermole and Robinson, 1985). A number of studies have promoted home visiting as a method for establishing more open communication between teachers and parents (Toomey & Allen, 1991; Hannon & Jackson, 1987).

Through out the year the parents have taught the teacher much about their children. During the home visits the parents described their child's interests, worries, friendships and any changes they had noted in their child's behaviour since starting school. During these initial home visits the teacher's role was to listen and learn from the parents. As a result of these conversations the teacher's expectations of several children changed, as did her perceptions of the parents' interest in their child's progress. Prior to the first round of home visits, the teacher stated her expectations for each child. This transcript details her expectations for Robert following his first week at school.

> Teacher: He'll probably be a struggler. If he's not even interested in books he's probably not had a real strong background in reading and literature so that's going to put him at least three or four years behind some of the others in the class. He's got a lot of ground to cover. The first day he slept on the floor, maybe he just has some really late nights, maybe he comes from a family where they stay up late at night. I don't know whether I'll see much of Robert's family, I think there's going to be a bit of a barrier there."

The first visit to Robert's home revealed that the assumptions made concerning Robert's literacy background were quite incorrect as these comments by Robert's mother illustrate.

> Robert's mum: He's into the same books..... He just likes the one book Little Red Riding Hood. I said to him "What about Jack and the Beanstalk? It's a good book."
>
> "No!"
>
> It's like if he knows something he'll stick to it and if he has to change he'll stick to what he knows.

Robert's mother told of his keen interest in books, even after she has read Robert his bedtime story he will sometimes wait stubbornly to be read some more.

> Robert's mum: He'll come down at 10 pm and says "I won't go to sleep until you read me a book"
>
> And I'll say "Robert you should have been in bed an hour ago!"

Following this first home visit the teacher readily recognised that her assumptions about Robert were quite wrong. His family valued education highly, perhaps because neither of his parents had been able to complete high school. The teacher's expectation that Robert's family would not be involved or interested in his education was inaccurate, as were her assumptions that Robert's prior experience with literacy was limited.

As Robert's case indicates, several parents informed the teacher of the child's interest in reading and writing at home, which was not as apparent in the classroom. This information altered the teacher's expectations of the children resulting in changes to her classroom teaching practices eg. inclusion of quieter children in class demonstrations of reading.

The parents' comments were used by the teacher to inform, evaluate and direct her teaching practices. The information conveyed by parents sometimes surprised her, particularly regarding the literacy capabilities of some of the quieter children. The parents' comments encouraged the teacher to invite these children to demonstrate their literacy knowledge to the class. This entry from the lecturer's field notes clarifies the way in which information supplied by the parents shaped the teacher's inclusion of the quieter, less confident children.

The teacher chose Robert to dictate a story for the news book. He tells the teacher the formula beginning one word at a time as she writes:

> Robert: Today is (pauses, stuck on what the day is.)
>
> Teacher: I'll give you a clue. Find the elephant that starts with the letter m. (On the wall are elephant shaped charts each one with a day of the week written on it.)
>
> Robert goes straight to the Monday card.
>
> Teacher: (Sounds) Mmmm
>
> Robert: Monday (pointing to the word and turning to watch the teacher write.)

The parents have also provided the teacher with information regarding the value of classroom activities. The teacher was encouraged to learn from the parents that the effort she expended in preparing activities for the children was worthwhile. Comments by parents that their child had been reading the little books made at school, or searching for words in the newspaper during breakfast, confirmed the teacher's classroom demonstrations of the reading and writing processes.

> Father: He's looking for words in other words, like he covers the letters up and says, "That says KS!" or "That says go!" or toilet, he covers the end and says "That's to."
>
> Mother: Yes he's picking out words out of other words.
>
> Father: And he's hearing the sounds in the words, that must have a B in it.

It is not often that teachers receive such direct feedback regarding the effects of their teaching strategies. It is even rarer for teachers to learn that the lessons or demonstrations they provide are practised by the children outside the context of the classroom.

Parents are learning too.

Although no parents from this class have been involved in the parent education programs conducted at the school, there has been a demonstrable increase in the parents' awareness of how to support their children as they become literate. Through regular contact established by home visits, parental help in the classroom and the journals, numerous opportunities have arisen which enabled the teacher to inform the parent of appropriate and individualised strategies for developing literacy skills.

Many parents volunteered to help in the classroom. Not only were the parents of great assistance, enabling a higher degree of individualised teaching, but they learned much about their own child's progress at school. From the observations parents made in the classroom they

sought advice from the teacher as to how they could support and extend their child's attempts to read and write at home.

> Mother: Mmm yes, well I can only speak from my own experience but when you get mums to come in and help in the classroom it's not just a dogsbody kind of role, it's a genuine sort of helping role, a teaching role. So it's good.
>
> Teacher: Have you found it helpful coming into the classroom?
>
> Mother: I probably do it more for Simon than I did for the other kids. I think it's of benefit for him to see me involved. I do it for his sake first.
>
> Teacher: Yes I meant it from that angle first. Have you found that what you've seen in the classroom you're able to bring home and use at home?
>
> Mother: Mmm, yes, yes. I'm also, you're kind of aware of maybe where his weaknesses and strengths are and you can kind of work on those things like you do with the other kids.

From such comments by parents the teacher realised the enormous benefits parents could gain by directly observing their children in the classroom. In response she invited all parents to visit the classroom and spend a morning as a "fly on the wall" watching their child participate in the classroom routine.

Children's actions link home and school.

A distinct theme that emerged from a review of the data was that the children frequently set the pace for learning in the classroom. We witnessed several 'literacy crazes' which were begun with one child sharing with the class a literacy artefact brought from home, such as a home-made book or letter.

The first 'craze' of writing letters to the Principal was started by Robin who brought a letter from home inviting the Principal to come and read to the class. The note had been written by an adult; however, Robin was able to read it to the class. The teacher encouraged this home writing by producing a postman's hat for the writer to wear and a post box for the letters. Soon the letters started to pour in from home. The morning routine was altered to accommodate the "letter writing craze". The children's enthusiasm for writing to other teachers in the school, inviting them to visit their class and read to them continued throughout the year. The parents reported supporting their children's interest in writing by assisting them with letter writing at home.

> Mother: She writes all these letters and says "What does that spell?" She continually wants to write to the teachers. Do they come and read? I asked her if it was okay to write to the teachers and she said yes.
>
> Teacher: Oh yes it's fine. We pass the letters on to the teachers and they do come and read to the class. The children really enjoy it.
>
> Mother: She knows how to write 'Dear' now, and I have to spell out the teacher's name and she can get some of the little words now and the others I spell out for her.

Comments such as this one reveal the important role parents play in scaffolding the child's knowledge about literacy learning and supporting their attempts to convey their meaning to others. The teacher's response, incorporating these home literacy artefacts into the classroom program encouraged the children to practice 'school learning' at home, strengthening the connection between the two learning contexts.

Parents and teachers observe the learning cycles.

As the year progressed the teacher noted the detailed and thoughtful observations parents contributed to their conversations. All parents in this class were keenly interested in their children's progress and were able to report in considerable detail the development of their children's literacy learning:

> Mother: She's forever got a pen and paper at home. Her toys don't play a very big part at all. She's continually writing these different sorts of letters all over the place and she's asking me how to spell words. Samantha comes home and she has homework and Rebecca will sit and look and she's continually picking out double O words, there's double 0 words. And she's picking out words like 'it' and 'is' and she picked out the start of Monday in Samantha's name. So she picked that out. She's reading a lot she's started to memorise books from home. She's pointing to the words as she's reading them.

Rebecca's mother reported behaviour that was not evident at school until much later in the year. The parents' comments reassured the teacher that the children were making progress, although this was not immediately evident in the classroom. A cycle identified in the data showed that the parents' reported observations of the child's ability at home, preceded literacy behaviour demonstrated in the classroom. Again the parent's comments altered the teacher's expectations of the child's reading or writing ablitity.

A further interesting pattern in the children's literacy development became evident during our conversations with the parents. Several parents reported the strong motivation expressed by their child to be able to read 'by myself'. The parents noted that their child was almost consumed with the desire to be able to read and write. The parents often asked the teacher for reassurance and guidance as to how to deal with the child's frustration as they sought to become independent readers and writers.

> Mother: He wants to learn quicker. He's asking lots of questions and he wants us to read and point to the words as we go. He'll come out with a page of words written out and he'll ask us to read it so you'll start reading through and he'll say "No you've got to point to them" and he's so keen to learn to read. Occasionally we have a bedtime story when we've finished the washing up and he's noticeably more interested in it now. Wants to see the words that I've read and if it's a funny word then he wants me to point to it....
>
> Teacher: He does try so hard. He's got that motivation to want to learn to read. He has high expectations of himself.
>
> Mother: I worry for him, you know being the third child and the others have done well. Is there any way I can alleviate the pressure and to keep the desire to learn but I don't want the pressure?
>
> Teacher: Just as long as he learns that he doesn't have to do it perfectly all the time. As long as you just encourage him and let him know that he can make mistakes. It's when they think they have to get it right the first time then they get frustrated.

The teacher noted that this pattern of determination and frustration seemed to be a threshold experience that the children broke through. Observations of this crisis in thinking as the children struggled to become literate began to interest the teacher. She reassured parents that the frustration period would soon pass and that significant literacy progress would follow.

The partnership is built.

> Alex's mother: I think it has been terrific and I think the response to your visits has been great too. To know exactly how the kids are going and that you're interested in their welfare is really good.

Although the project is yet to be evaluated, parents reported many favourable comments about their inclusion as active partners in their children's education.

> Mother: Actually I've been thinking about it all day, What is education? The great philosophical debate but education isn't just formal learning - it needs to be a lot of other things as well. But where you draw the line as to whose responsibility it is, parents or school? I think there's got to be a little bit of both.
>
> Teacher: Mmmm
>
> Mother: That's the debate that's been going on for centuries and particularly now. Where does education at home start and begin and where does school? But school I think has to take responsibility for development other than just formal learning other than writing and reading. It has to take responsibility for children's personal development hence sport and other extra curricula activities, in the same way that the home has to take responsibility for some of the formal things. You have to encourage your kids with reading and writing.
>
> Teacher: Yes I think schools, it used to be a different story in schools from the outside world. I think schools have learned a lot from how people learn in other situations, from how they learn at home and it's coming together a lot more. Basically the changes in teaching reading and writing have been that we've looked at how children learn the sorts of things that parents do with their children at home, it's not lots of flash cards and drilling letters. Lots of the natural things that you do at home is how that we teach reading and writing now. So it has all sort of come together and obviously we've taken it one step further and formalised the link between the home and the school. It meshes them together.

The partnerships forged by this Kindergarten teacher with **all** parents concur with Epstein's (1986) reported findings, that teachers who are active in co-operating with parents report no difference in the involvement of parents from various socio-economic groups.

This study demonstrates that there are benefits for teachers in establishing partnerships with parents. Epstein (1986, p.290) suggests that 'teacher practices of parent involvement maximize cooperation between teachers and parents and enhance the teacher's professional standing from the parents' perspective.' The teacher in this study explains additional advantages she has identifed from fostering partnerships with the parents of the children in her class:

> I suppose whenever teachers say to me, "Oh but it's so much work !" my immediate reaction is, "Yes it is a lot of work but you get so much out of it! Isn't that worth the effort?" I mean it is an effort to go out and communicate with the parents **but they they make my job easier because they are sharing in the teaching. I am repaid so much by seeing the children learning, seeing the parents helping their children learning and that it's reflected in the classroom.**

CONCLUSION

Meaningful communication results when parents and teachers know each other better. When teachers listen to parents' expectations for their child, discuss and share understandings of how young children learn to read and write, then the teacher's expectations for children's success at school may be dramatically altered. When teachers acknowledge parents as the experts about their child and listen to parents as they report their observations of their child's literacy learning, then the teacher's assumptions about the child and the family may be dramatically altered. The

development of partnerships between teachers and parents requires commitment from both parties. The results of such partnerships are multiple and extensive as the study has outlined.

> *Effective long term parent involvement is a two way street. We have to meet parents on their own ground; they have to meet us on our ground. It is important that we share our views, our professional knowledge with parents. But we must also be taught by parents.* (Weikart, 1980, in Grant, 1989, p.112).

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